

Rev. Joan Pell
Byron United Methodist Church
Sermon: 9/14/14
Series: Are We There Yet?
Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7



We're Thirsty!



<Read Exodus 17:1-7 NLT¹>

At the Lord's command, the whole community of Israel left the wilderness of Sin and moved from place to place. Eventually they camped at Rephidim, but there was no water there for the people to drink. ² So once more the people complained against Moses. "Give us water to drink!" they demanded. "Quiet!" Moses replied. "Why are you complaining against me? And why are you testing the Lord?"

³ But tormented by thirst, they continued to argue with Moses. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Are you trying to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?" ⁴ Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What should I do with these people? They are ready to stone me!"

⁵ The Lord said to Moses, "Walk out in front of the people. Take your staff, the one you used when you struck the water of the Nile, and call some of the elders of Israel to join you. ⁶ I will stand before you on the rock at Mount Sinai. Strike the rock, and water will come gushing out. Then the people will be able to drink." So Moses struck the rock as he was told, and water gushed out as the elders looked on.

⁷ Moses named the place Massah (which means "test") and Meribah (which means "arguing") because the people of Israel argued with Moses and tested the Lord by saying, "Is the Lord here with us or not?"



<Paraphrase this illustration from Rev Mary Brennan Thorpe from Richmond, VA.²>

Imagine that you're driving to ... [Southern California] and somewhere on the highway, after your kids have eaten and drunk everything you packed to help you all get through the trip, the car gets a flat tire. You get out, laboriously unpack all the stuff in the back that you packed so carefully only a couple of hours ago so that you can get to the spare, only to discover that it, too, is flat. You mutter a few choice words. By now, the kids are saying "when will we get

¹ We read this in a reader's theater format as found at <http://re-worship.blogspot.ca/2011/09/readers-theatre-exodus-17-1-7.html>.

² Mary Brennan Thorp, "Are We There Yet" in *Rev Mibi Blog*, (Richmond, VA: Church of the Epiphany, March 22, 2014). <http://rev2bmibi.blogspot.com/2014/03/sermon-for-sunday-march-23-2014-lent-3.html>

*there? I'm hungry. I'm thirsty. I need to go to the bathroom." And you murmur sarcastically under your breath
"God, thanks a lot!"*

And as the temperature rises while you're waiting for AAA to show up, the tempers of everyone in the car rise as well, until everybody's blaming everyone else for the situation. "I thought I told you to get the tire pressure checked." "Why is it always my job to make sure the car is maintained?" "Who ate all the Pringles?" "This was supposed to be my vacation, and I'm spending it frying like a, like a...potato chip on the side of the road." "I'm bored." "He's touching me!" "It's not MY fault!"

Muttering and murmuring, just like the Israelites. You can imagine the Israelites had exactly the same kind of conversation, minus the car and the Pringles.

Now you and I both know that in the car ride with the flat tire scenario, eventually AAA will come and help. We can stay in a motel down the road if it's impossible to get to ... [Los Angeles] that night. There are 7-11s and supermarkets and restaurants, and we will not starve or die of thirst. And still we mutter and murmur, because our needs are not being satisfied and because we have lost touch with the hope that they will eventually be satisfied.

And we conveniently forget that God is responsible for us having the kind of work that means we can afford a car and a vacation and such. **Selective amnesia seems to be a human trait.**



In our scripture today the Israelites had been rescued from Egypt. They were slaves in Egypt and badly treated. It took 10 plagues before the Pharaoh finally released them. Then they were chased by the Egyptian Army and the Red Sea parted miraculously.

They'd complained about a lack of water before. Exodus 15:22-25. ²² *Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. ²⁴ And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" ²⁵ He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.*

And last week we read about how they were hungry in the wilderness and how God provided manna, fresh on the ground each morning waiting to be gathered to bake into bread and flocks of quails to eat as meat in the evening. And now they once again are concerned about water.

We can only imagine just how scary it was to be wandering around in an arid area once their water supplies were low or non-existent. We are experiencing something similar

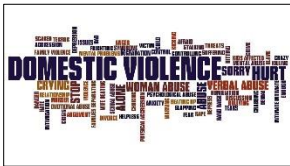
this summer in California with the drought here. The Israelites seem to have very short memories. They forgot God's promises to them. They forgot how far they had come and the trials that they had overcome. They had lost their trust and their hope that God would find a way. And they felt like God was absent.

In their understanding, their theology, when things were going well, then God was with them. And when things were going badly, then God had abandoned them. And since God wasn't there, then Moses became the target to blame. The Israelites lose hope that God will give them what they need to survive the journey. And when you lose hope, you lose faith.

It was hard for the Israelites to escape being slaves and enter into a world of freedom, and they wished at times that they had stuck with what they knew. As we hear their familiar story it is easy for us to scoff at them and say, that of course they were better off in the wilderness than in Egypt, and that it might be temporarily difficult but it'll get better soon.



Yet, it is no easier today to leave oppression behind than it was then. This week on Monday the NFL announced an indefinite suspension for Ray Rice. Ray had been caught on video tape in an elevator hitting his fiancé, Janay Palmer, who is now his wife. Janay has been roundly criticized on social media this week for going ahead with their marriage. I don't want to speculate about the ins and outs of this particular case, but the issue of domestic violence is an important topic.



And it started to trend on twitter, with two trains of thought #whyistayed and #whyileft. Now women and men can be victims of violence, but this week it has been the women who have spoken up and Huffington Post did a follow-up article on Friday analyzing the reasons given that women give for staying.³ Many women leave and then go back to their spouses too - it takes an average of 7 attempts to get out. The article identified 6 main factors that cause people to stay with the abuse:

Family – concerned about children and losing custody, safer to stay

Shame – too ashamed to tell anyone what was going on

Isolation – had chosen him over family & friends, so has no one to turn to

Money – can't afford to get out of the relationship – will lose house, car, savings

Fear – if I told anyone, he would hunt me down & shoot me, slit throat, throw acid

Love – believed could love the abuse out of him, and love is not easy, it is meant to hurt a bit – some suffering to be with soul mate is ok.

³ Melissa Jeltsen, "‘Why Didn't You Just Leave?’ Six Domestic Violence Survivors Explain Why It's Never That Simple" in *Huffington Post*, September 12, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/12/why-didnt-you-just-leave_n_5805134.html



And sadly, the views from churches often increased the victim's willpower to stick it out in the violent relationship. This #whyistayed tweet said "I stayed because my pastor told me that God hates divorce. It didn't cross my mind that God might hate abuse also."

It doesn't matter how angry someone is, it is never okay for that person to hit another person. That is not love. And it is not the victim's fault, however many buttons they pushed. And staying in that relationship because of what the Bible says about the sacredness of marriage doesn't apply any more. That sacredness has already been violated by the perpetrator. Jesus taught us ways of non-violence and yes, that we are to love others but he also taught us to love ourselves, and that requires a balance that is no longer there when there is domestic violence.

If you know anyone who needs to get out of this type of situation in Contra Costa, then here's what they should do.

emergency **911**

crisis housing resources **211** (our county and some others)

STAND! For families free of violence **1-888-215-5555** (east contra costa)

Shepherd's Gate **(925) 308-7507** (local crisis center for battered & homeless women & children)

National Domestic Violence Hotline **1-800-799-SAFE (7233)**

911 in emergency	
211 for crisis housing resources	
1-888-215-5555	STAND!
925-308-7507	For Families Free of Violence Shepherd's Gate
1-800-799-SAFE (7233)	National Domestic Violence Hotline

I will post these numbers on Facebook (www.facebook.com/byronumc.net) and the church website this week (www.byronumc.net).



So back to the Israelites struggling with their new-found freedom. They are rapidly losing hope and their trust in God despite the memories that they have of the times that God has helped them. So, when God does step in to help, what does God do?

God ignores the terms of the quarrel. The Israelites are complaining about Moses leadership and blaming him. Moses says they are angry enough, that they will start throwing rocks at him. God's solution at this point is to ignore the Israelites attitude towards Moses leadership and address the underlying problem that they really are physically thirsty.

When churches or individuals are in conflict. It is rare that the argument at the time is what the trouble is all about. If church members are arguing vehemently about the proposed color of a new carpet, then there's probably an underlying power struggle going on, or there's some upset at something deeper that folk are ignoring because it is easier to talk about carpets, or there's a disagreement over the church's vision for the future. A teenager and their parents' argument over a curfew might not really be about the curfew, but about a lack of trust between the teenager and the parent, or about

parent's reluctance to let their child grow up, or about the teenagers poor judgment skills.

So God ignores the terms of the quarrel and cuts to the real need providing them with water. And even beyond their physical need for water, the Israelites had a spiritual dilemma.

In final verses we read that: *Moses named the place Massah (which means "test") and Meribah (which means "arguing") because the people of Israel argued with Moses and tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD here with us or not?"*



Was God with them? How can we know that God is with us? Well God answers this time by bringing water out of a lifeless thing. A rock is about as lifeless as it gets. And yet God tells Moses to hit it with his staff. God finds ways to make new life flow in the most unexpected of ways.

<Taken with slight modification from Magdalene's Musings.⁴>

The Israelites may have been thirsty for water, but they had an even deeper thirst: a thirst for reassurance, that they were not alone on this journey into the unknown. A thirst for guidance, a steady hand at the helm. A thirst for compassion, the sense that someone, somewhere, understood what they were going through. Is the Lord among us or not? Is God here?

And what are we thirsting for today? Apart from needing a good dose of rain this winter, we are normally blessed with faucets that do not run dry. I think we thirst spiritually for the very same things. We too thirst for reassurance, that we are not alone on our journeys into the unknown. We too thirst for guidance, at the very least in knowing there are trustworthy and good-hearted souls to whom we can turn when our questions and worries steal our sleep at night. We too thirst for compassion—we want to know that someone gets it, that someone really understand what we are going through. We thirst to know the answer to the question: Is the Lord among us or not? Is God here?

And if we are thirsting for these things—just imagine how much others are too. What it is like to be someone who does not know where his next meal is coming from? What it is like to sleep in a friend's house for a week and then move onto another friend's home because you have no home of your own? What is it like to be living with verbal or physical abuse? What is like to be battling cancer or heart disease or MS or Alzheimer's? Imagine that deep thirst for reassurance, and for

⁴ Magdalene, "The Thirsty Ones: A Sermon on Exodus 17:1-7" in *Madalene's Musings Blog* (March 27, 2011). <http://magdalenesmusings.blogspot.com/2011/03/thirsty-ones-sermon-on-exodus-171-7.html>.

guidance, and for compassion. Is the Lord among us or not? Is God here?

Maybe this is the question we need to ask ourselves when we find we are confronted with quarrelsome people who test our patience. Is this person thirsting for reassurance? Is he thirsting for guidance? Is she thirsting for compassion? Because, we can do that for one another. We can be the presence of God for one another—out of our own sense that God is with us, here, in this place.



If you look around you at Coffee Hour, and you see someone sharing her time, giving reassurance... God is here. If you look into the eyes of someone and realize that they have just given you the best guidance you could imagine, simply by helping you to understand what your heart is telling you... God is here. If you can respond with compassion to someone who irks you, who makes you roll your eyes, who really tests your patience ... God is here.



We are, all of us, “the thirsty ones.” And being thirsty can open us up to God’s presence. The Israelites are presented by Moses with the sure sign of God’s presence, and they can go on for another day. And as we thirst too, we can trust that God will point someone with a stick towards a rock and water will burst forth.

Great is God’s Faithfulness!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray.

We give you thanks gracious and generous God that in the dry wildernesses of our lives, in the days when we are thirsty that you quench our thirst. When we begin to doubt your presence, and grumble that your love is unreliable, you offer us your reassurance, guidance and compassion. Help us not to forget the ways that you have kept your promises and made new life flow in unexpected ways. Enable us to keep in touch with the hope that our needs for today will be met with sure signs of your presence. And help us to be that presence for others. In the name of Jesus, the Living Water, we pray. AMEN.

Resources

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year A, Volume 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.